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SPRUCE STREET LECTURES.

LECTURE III.

*Delivered on the Evening of the 25th December, 1831, by the
Rev. Samuel B. Howe, D. D. of Carlisle.*

THE USE OF THE MEANS OF GRACE.

“Strive to enter in at the strait gate.”—*Luke* xiii. 24.

THE importance of genuine piety, and the difficulty of its attainment and cultivation, are frequently pressed on our attention in the sacred pages.—The salvation of our souls depends on our possessing it, and yet, in our efforts to obtain it, innumerable foes oppose us, and innumerable obstacles must be surmounted. To encourage us, however, to meet every foe, and to bear every evil with unshrinking constancy, we are addressed with most urgent exhortations and alluring promises; assistance from on high is offered us in the conflict, and to him who overcometh it “shall be given to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.”

In the passage before us, and in a similar passage in the gospel of Matthew, the design of our Lord is to show the necessity of directing our attention to secure the salvation of our souls, from a consideration of the difficulties which we

must encounter in so doing, and from the ease with which we may mistake and perish. He represents us as travellers, journeying to unchanging abodes of bliss or wo, and assures us that our final destiny will depend on our present conduct. "Wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be who go in thereat."—While "strait is the gate, and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." It becomes us, therefore, carefully to seek to enter in, since, if we mistake and fail, the consequences will be tremendously fearful. The exposition of the passage is easy. A *gate* usually stands at the head of a way, and through it we are admitted into the way,—the term *way*, when applied to the actions and condition of men, means their habitual temper and conduct; and the narrow way, of which our Lord speaks, means that temper and conduct which are necessary for our admittance into heaven. We enter on this way only by a thorough conversion from sin to holiness, evidenced by unfeigned repentance and faith; and, until we have experienced this conversion, we have not taken one step in the pathway to bliss. This gate is called *strait*, because of the anguish of mind which usually accompanies the commencement of a religious life. Into this gate our Lord commands us to *strive* to enter. In the original, the word which is translated *strive*, is very forcible. It signifies, to make a violent effort; to contend as in combat; to labour against opposition with the utmost endeavour, both of body and of mind. This command is evidently addressed to the unconverted; to those who have not entered the narrow way, who are outside of the gate, who are living impenitent in sin. Such are commanded "to strive to enter in at the strait gate"—that is, to seek for the con-

version of their souls, that in the exercise of repentance and faith, they may enter on and lead a new life of holy obedience. We need not fear to imitate our Lord Jesus; and here is a direct exhortation to the unregenerate to seek for repentance and faith. But how are they to be sought, since they are the fruits of the Spirit, the gift of God, and without his grace we never shall attain ~~to~~ them? We reply, they must be sought in the diligent use of those means of grace which God has appointed, and which are usually accompanied with the influences of the Holy Spirit. To illustrate, confirm, and enforce this truth, is the object of the ensuing Discourse; and may the Holy Spirit bless to our edification what shall be spoken.

Two propositions invite our attention.

I. There are means of grace; and in the use of these means divine influences are usually received, both for the conversion of sinners and the edification of believers.

II. It is the duty of all men diligently to use these means. Having discussed these two propositions we shall,

III. Notice some objections which have been urged against the doctrine which we advocate, and then,

IV. Conclude with the practical improvement of our subject.

I. There are means of grace.

By a *mean*, is intended that which, as an instrument, conduces to the attainment of an end; and by *means of grace*, are meant all those institutions of God in the use of which man seeks and usually obtains divine grace. All these means are adapted to the rational nature of man, and are fitted to inform his mind, to touch his conscience, and to awaken his affections.

It pleases God for the illustration of his wisdom, his

goodness, and his power, to administer his government by the intervention of means. Were it his pleasure to do so, he could, by a direct and immediate act of his own, bestow on us all that we need, preserve our existence, give health to our bodies, and knowledge to our minds; or he could rain down manna from heaven; or, without the toil of the husbandman, he could cause the harvest to spring up in rich abundance from the earth. Such, however, is not the method which his infinite wisdom has seen fit to adopt. His blessings flow to us through the intervention of means; we can obtain them only when we seek them by the use of proper means.

If we would preserve life, we must use food; if we would enjoy health, we must practice temperance and prudence; if the scholar would acquire rich stores of various knowledge, he must give his days and his nights to unremitting study; and if the husbandmen would rejoice in the abundance of his crops, he must submit to the toil of breaking up the ground, and of casting into it the precious seed. The success of these efforts depends on the blessing of God, and without that, they will be wholly ineffectual. We are commanded, therefore, to put them forth in humble dependence on his assistance and blessing, and thus we are taught to recognise him as the author of all good, and carefully to notice and admire his perfections as exhibited in his works.

The same system is established in the kingdom of Grace as that which prevails in the kingdom of Providence. They who ask, receive; they who seek, find. He who "watches daily at Wisdom's gates, waiting at the posts of her doors, shall find her," and, along with her, life and blessedness.

The means of grace become such only in consequence of the appointment of God. It is of the utmost importance to keep this truth steadily in view, for there is a sinful pro-

pensity in men to substitute their own inventions in place of the divine appointments. This propensity God frowns upon and rebukes. "In vain do ye worship me teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." Our warrant for using any ordinance, is derived from his appointment of it, while our encouragement to observe it, arises from his promise of accepting and blessing us in so doing. Whatever appearances of zeal, or of devotion, or of success, may be exhibited, awful delusion must attend the pursuit of any measures which God has not ordained.

Among the means which are designed for the conversion of sinners, and the edification of believers, the three principal are, *the preaching of the Gospel; the written Word of God; and fervent prayer.*

One of the chief means of grace, both for the conversion of sinners, and the edification of believers, is the preaching of the Gospel. "It hath pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them who believe." "How," asks the apostle, "shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe on him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?"

The ministry of reconciliation was appointed by the Redeemer, just before his ascension to glory, when he commanded his disciples to "go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature." After Paul had been called by his grace, he was sent as a messenger of mercy "to the Gentiles, to open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God." The divine blessing has accompanied the ministers of the word from the days of the apostles to the present time. On the day of Pentecost, thousands were converted by the preaching

of Peter; the Lord opened Lydia's heart to attend to the things which were spoken by Paul; and in every succeeding age the preaching of the Gospel has been to thousands "the power of God unto salvation."

And the principal instrument employed by the Holy Spirit in the work of regeneration and sanctification of our souls, is *the written Word*. The apostle Peter reminds his other brethren that "they were born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God which liveth and abideth forever." "The law of the Lord," says the Psalmist "is perfect, converting the soul."

The special design of God in giving to us his Word, is to lead us into the knowledge of himself, and in the paths of life. "All scripture," says the apostle, "is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." It has guided through life, up to the third heavens, myriads of the redeemed who are now walking in the presence of God, and we shall do well to take heed to it "as to a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in our hearts." Any attempt to sink the value of the living ministry, or of the written Word, is injurious to the highest interests of mankind. The Word without the ministry would be neglected, and the ministry without the Word, would run into error, and introduce woful delusion. The word and the ministry united, are the great bulwarks of religion, and the instruments which God designs for the conversion, not merely of individuals, but of the world.

To the ministry and the Word, we add fervent prayer. "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find;

knock, and it shall be opened unto you." Prayer is the great medium of the intercourse which man holds with God, in which he opens the most secret desires of his soul, and confesses and deplores his sins, and makes known his wants. "The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." "If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him."

Besides the means of grace already mentioned, there are others which are highly important in themselves, and in the use of which, God has promised to bestow on us his grace. Among the chief of these we place the religious education of children. "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." The neglect of this duty is a principal reason of the awful amount of irreligion which every where prevails; for the surest method to banish religion from the world, is to banish it from families. The pious Baxter has given it as his opinion, that if every parent would faithfully discharge his duty in bringing up his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, it would almost render unnecessary the living ministry. Certain it is, that the neglect of it brings deep guilt on the parent, and shows an awful unconcern in relation to the highest interests of his child, by leaving him exposed to the pernicious influence of false sentiment and vicious example, without any fixed principles to save him from their contagion. The consequences on the part of the child are, generally, such as might be expected—an irreligious life, and an unhappy death. From the lips of pious and faithful parents, especially from the lips of a pious mother, the child generally receives his earliest, his best, and his

most lasting impressions. To her it belongs to direct his first thoughts, to mould his temper; to give an impulse to all his feelings and desires; and her instructions, and warnings, and prayers, and tears, are the things which, amid all the waywardness and folly of mankind, are last forgotten by her child; which exert over his heart a most salutary influence, and are often recalled with fond remembrance and gratitude. Should he be so unhappy as to be enticed by ungodly companions, and to fall into dissolute habits, the remembrance of his mother's instructions and prayers will haunt his gayest hours, and check his mad career; and though he may have run deep in sinful excesses, will probably bring him back a humble penitent to God—blessed reward for the anxieties, and sorrows, and instruction, and prayers, of maternal love, thus to have trained a child for holiness, and heaven, and God! Precious is the memory of such a parent to her offspring, for “her children rise up after her and call her blessed.”*

* A striking instance of the correctness of the above remarks occurred to the author immediately after he had preached this discourse. On his return home from Philadelphia, there was in the stage with him, as a fellow-passenger, a respected brother in the ministry, who resides in one of the western States. In the course of conversation, he gave to the author a short account of his religious history. He is the son of pious parents, who had devoted him in early life to God, and carefully instructed him in the principles of religion. When he had attained a sufficient age, he studied medicine, and, if I mistake not, attended the medical lectures at Philadelphia. Unfortunately, by perusing the works of some infidel writers, and by the influence of ungodly companions, his mind was corrupted, and he became a sceptic. He remarked, however, that he never could entirely embrace the sentiments of sceptical writers, owing to his having read so extensively in ancient history, which enabled him to detect the falsehood of many of their statements. He afterwards commenced the practice of physic, and his irreligion and scepticism were fre-

Without enlarging on the other means of grace, we shall content ourselves with simply mentioning them. They are the following:—

Serious meditation. “I thought on my way,” says the Psalmist, “and turned my feet unto thy testimonies.”

Self-examination. “Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves; know ye not your own selves, except ye be reprobates.”

The company of pious men. “He that walketh with wise men shall be wise; but a companion of fools shall be destroyed.”

The sacraments, which are especially designed to edify believers.

It is by the diligent and conscientious use of these means, that men are commanded to seek for spiritual blessings, and

quently noticed by others, and caused great grief to his pious parents. One day an infidel neighbour began conversing of his irreligious conduct before a company, one of which was his mother, and with a view, it was thought, of wounding her feelings. He scoffingly said that there is no truth in the old saying, “train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it;” that those children who were brought up religiously always turned out more wicked than others, and noticed him as an instance. His mother, a pious Scotch lady, was indignant at the impiety of the declaration, and afterwards said, that, at the time, she felt more anxious that God would vindicate the truth of his declarations than even for the salvation of her son. She had been anxiously praying for his conversion, but now she prayed that God would exhibit his glory by proving the truth of his word. About this time her son was led to read the Scriptures with Scott's notes; deep impressions were produced on his mind; he was led to a salutary concern for the salvation of his soul, and became, we trust, a sincere believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is now a minister of the Gospel, and nobly exerting himself to bestow on others those blessings which the Gospel alone conveys. He considered his conversion as an answer to the prayers of his parents, and said to me, “I was saved because I am a child of the covenant.”

when they thus use them, these blessings are usually received. God will have his own appointments honoured, nor have we any right to expect his blessing while we neglect his institutions, or violate his commandments. The most diligent use of these means, however, does not lay him under any obligation to bestow on us his grace; for if so, God would be our debtor, and bound in justice to save us. But, in the same individual, grace and merit cannot co-exist; nor can any unregenerate man perform good works acceptable to God. “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us.”

Considered simply in themselves, these means have no efficacy to convert the soul; but all their efficacy is derived from the accompanying influences of the Holy Spirit. They are, indeed, adapted to our rational nature, and suited alike to inform the mind and to affect the heart. In effecting the work of regeneration, God deals with man as a rational creature, by placing before him motives; by addressing to him commands, promises, warnings, threatenings, and invitations; and by appealing to every passion and desire of the soul—to the affections, the reason, and the conscience. In the preaching and reading of the Word, truth comes to us clothed with the authority and majesty of God; our attention is called to subjects the most sublime, interesting, solemn, and affecting. The worth of the soul, the solemnities of death, the terrors of the judgment, and the glories and horrors of eternity, are placed before us to rouse us from the slumbers of sin. The indignation of the Lord is denounced against the hardened transgressor, and he is warned of that awful perdition which awaits him; while the sweet message of mercy is addressed to the humbled

penitent, and he is pointed to the cross of the Redeemer, and assured that there is forgiveness for the chief of sinners. In prayer we approach into the immediate presence of the eternal God; we contemplate his infinite majesty, his spotless purity, his boundless power, and his amazing compassion; we confess our depravity, our unworthiness, our guilt, and our dependence on his grace; we offer our thanksgivings for mercies, and we humbly ask his pardoning and sanctifying grace. Every thing in prayer is calculated to produce deep impressions on the heart, and to awaken its best affections. Still, without the influences of the Holy Spirit all will be in vain. The new heart is the gift of God. Even the eloquence of an Apostle will be of no avail for the conversion of the soul, without the accompany influences of the Holy Spirit. "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man." "I have planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase." Any success that may attend our efforts should be ascribed to the power and goodness of God. "The weapons of our warfare," says the apostle, "are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds; casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.

Having thus exhibited the nature and design of the means of grace, we proceed to consider,

II. Our second head of discourse, which is to show,

That it is the duty of all men to use with diligence these means.

We are not aware that any have denied that it is the duty

of sincere believers in Christ to use them, but it has been questioned whether the unregenerate should be exhorted to the use of them. Much of the difficulty on this point will, we think, be removed by a clear apprehension of their nature and design. They may be considered under three aspects: as duties, arising out of the relation which exists between man and God; as means, in the use of which sinners usually receive divine grace; and as means of edification to believers.

1. The means which we have specified may be considered as duties arising from the command of God, and the relation which exists between him and man. The Gospel message and the written Word are addressed to every creature, and every man is bound to listen when God speaks. Prayer is an humble acknowledgment of God as our Creator, Ruler, Preserver, and Judge. No man on earth has authority to say to another, that it is not his duty to listen to the preaching of the Gospel, or to read the Scriptures, or to offer prayer. These are solemn acts of worship, in which we acknowledge God as our God, and therefore no man is at liberty to neglect them.

It is in vain to reply, that since unregenerate men do not perform these duties from holy principles, they will not be pleasing to God, and therefore the observance of them ought not to be enjoined; for the same objection will apply to every act of the unregenerate, and, if pushed to its utmost, will reduce them to a state of complete inactivity. We are commanded "whether, therefore, ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." But must we forbid sinners to eat or drink, because they are not influenced by holy principles? Our obligation to obey God arises not from the possession of holy principles of action,

but from the relation which we bear to him as his rational creatures, endowed with faculties which render us capable of knowing, loving, and obeying him. As the most glorious Being in the universe, and infinitely perfect, he is worthy of our supreme affection; and, as he is our Creator, Preserver, Ruler, and Judge, we are under the strongest possible obligations to love and obey him. We are bound to believe all that he says, to perform all that he commands, to submit to all that he appoints, and to consecrate to his service and glory all the powers which we possess. It is therefore, the duty of every man to hear, and believe, and receive the message which God addresses to him in his holy Word; and by humble prayer, and supplication, and thanksgiving, to acknowledge and worship him as God over all; and nothing can release him from these duties.

Moreover, since our Lord Jesus Christ has commanded his ministers to preach the Gospel to every creature, it is the duty of every creature to hear; and not merely to hear, but to remember, to meditate upon, to lay to heart, and to pray over, what he hears; to examine it by the light of the Scriptures, and to compare with it his own temper and conduct. It will not, we imagine, be asserted that all they of Berea, who are spoken of, Acts xvii. 11, were truly converted, and yet, they are commended, because they received the Word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether these things were so; therefore, it is added, "many of them believed."

The numerous, and strong commands which are given to the unregenerate, to seek for the divine favour, in our opinion, decisively settles the question. "Strive to enter in at the strait gate." "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near." "Stand ye in

honour on his own institutions; that the Gospel has most success among those who, from infancy, are instructed in souls." "Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not. Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoso findeth me, findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord." These, and a multitude of similar commands, are addressed to all men alike, urging them to the use of the means through which divine mercy is obtained.

2. Another consideration which establishes our doctrine is, that, on the use of these means, sinners usually receive the renewing influences of the Holy Spirit.

When we look back on the history of the Church, and of the world, we find, that true religion has prevailed among those nations who enjoyed these means, and, generally, in the same degree as they were enjoyed in purity and abundance. The condition of the heathen nations who were destitute of them was truly gloomy. It was among the descendants of Abraham, who were blessed with the priesthood, the Word, and the ordinances of the House of God, that the great body of the pious who lived before the coming of Christ were found. Since that event, true piety has prevailed, almost exclusively, in the Christian Church. It has been preserved by means of the various institutions which God has appointed; and if these institutions were once abolished, or neglected, impiety would universally prevail.

When we turn from nations and communities, to contemplate individuals, we still find the divine blessing accompanying the use of these means. We pretend not to limit the Holy One of Israel; nor, do we deny extraordinary instances of conversion; but we find, in fact, that God puts

the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest to your souls, and in the strict observance of its ordinances. Thousands have been brought to saving faith in Christ, through the divine blessing accompanying the preaching and reading of the Word, when attended on with devout meditation and prayer. In one of the most admirable uninspired representations of the rise and progress of religion in the soul, with which the world has ever been blessed, the awakened sinner, oppressed with the burden of his sins, is represented as seeking for retirement, there to read, and pray, and meditate, till Evangelist meets him, and directs him to the narrow gate, and to Christ, for salvation. The excellent Dr. Scott, in his "Force of Truth," has given us the history of his own conversion, and it clearly shows, that they have reason to expect the divine blessing, who seek it by a devout perusal of the Scriptures, with meditation and prayer. In one word, divine grace has flowed forth in this way, to the myriads of the redeemed. While they were seeking God in the use of the means, his Spirit came upon them with his renewing influences, and wrought in them unfeigned repentance and faith.

3. A third argument in favour of the sentiment which we are advocating, is, that those who live in the wilful and habitual neglect of these means, have no right to expect the salvation of their souls. If the divine blessing usually accompanies them, then, to neglect them, is to guard against the reception of this blessing, is to put ourselves as far as we can out of the reach of mercy, and deliberately to choose the paths of death. Whoever acts thus, will, hereafter, in the bitterness of his soul, repent of his folly. By so doing

he incurs the displeasure of God. An awful denunciation is pronounced by the Redeemer himself, on those cities which rejected his preaching. "Wo unto thee, Chorazin! wo unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes." Impenitent sinner, it is no speculation, it is solemn truth, that if the Gospel message is rejected by thee, if it does not lead thee to offer fervent supplication for the renewing influences of the Spirit of God, and if it is not cordially received with penitence and faith, thy condemnation is certain and terrible; more terrible than that of Sodom and Gomorrhah. To thee, the Gospel message is now addressed; to thee, pardon, purchased by a Saviour's blood, is freely offered; to thee, the hour of mercy is announced, and thou art pointed to the throne of grace, and a compassionate Saviour, that thou mayest obtain salvation. Reject not the message, refuse not the mercy, lest, peradventure, throughout eternity thou mayest curse thy folly and thy sin.

4. But finally, the question of the propriety and importance of a diligent use of the means of grace, is settled, in fact, by the conduct of every awakened sinner and every pious parent. When the arrows of conviction have pierced the sinner's breast, you cannot prevent him from praying, from reading, from hearing the Gospel preached. He sees that he is a guilty and ruined man; he feels himself to be sinking amid the billows of wrath; and fears lest the shadows of everlasting death are coming over his soul. Oh, how vain is every effort now to deter him from asking for mercy from his God! His cries pierce the heavens—"What shall I do to be saved?"—"God be merciful to me a sinner." How precious to him now, is his once slighted

Bible, and with what intense anxiety does he listen to the minister of Jesus, hoping for some message of mercy, some glad tidings of peace, some promise of salvation, that may soothe the anguish of his wounded spirit. Helpless and ruined, he casts himself at the feet of the Redeemer, resolved that if he perishes, he will perish with the cry for mercy, as the last sound that is uttered by his lips.

Again: Does the pious parent, because he fears that his child is unconverted, hesitate to place him under the preaching of the Gospel; or to teach him to read the Scriptures; or to offer his prayers to God? How strange, how utterly absurd would it sound, to hear a pious parent plead, as an excuse for the neglect of these things, that he has no reason to believe that his child is regenerate. No! he knows that the most important duty which he owes to his child is to "bring him up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." He therefore devotes him, as Samuel was devoted, to the Lord; he teaches him, as Timothy was taught, "from a child to know the Holy Scriptures;" he accustoms him to the use of the means of grace, because he knows that in this way divine grace is usually received, and he asks, with fervent supplication, that the divine blessing may accompany his efforts.

Such, then, are our reasons for asserting, that a diligent use of the means of grace is the duty of every man. There is not a sinner on earth to whom we dare say, 'you must not attend the preaching of the Gospel; you must not read the word of God; you must not pray, or attend to any religious duty.' It would be as absurd to do this, as it would be to forbid a beggar, who is dying with hunger, to ask for food; or to debar a sick man from the use of medicine for the recovery of health. It would be to exclude men from

the remedy which God has provided for their healing; from the very means which he has instituted for their recovery from sin and death, and in the use of which only, we can hope to receive those influences of the Holy Spirit which prepare us for heaven. But,

III. Objections have been raised against the doctrine which we are advocating, and it is proper that they should be considered. We shall notice but two, since they are the most common and important.

1. The first is, the decree of God renders the use of means unavailing; that, if God has predestinated us to salvation, we shall be saved whether we use or neglect these means. To this objection our reply shall be short. It proceeds on a misrepresentation and mistake of the nature of the divine decrees. The Bible speaks of no absolute, unconditional decree, but always represents the means as decreed in connexion with the end. The divine decree extends to every event and to all concerns; but they who raise this objection apply it exclusively to our religious concerns; whereas, to be consistent, they should carry it throughout all their affairs, and use no means for the attainment of any end; if sick, they should take no medicine; if poor, they should use no efforts to obtain wealth; for, on their own principles, if God has decreed that they shall recover health, or obtain riches, these events will happen as certainly without as with effort. Every one sees the absurdity of this sentiment when applied to the common affairs of life, and it is just as absurd when applied to religious subjects.

2. A second objection, which has been very strongly urged against the truth we are advocating is, that it is unscriptural and dangerous to exhort sinners to use the means of

grace, since, to do so, has a tendency to lead them to rest in the means, without exercising saving repentance and faith. It is contended, that sinners should be exhorted to immediate submission to God; to immediate repentance and faith; and that it is at our peril, if we exhort them to any thing short of these, or which does not include them. To render this objection plainer, we state the following case: A sinner, awakened to a sense of his guilt and danger, anxiously inquires "what shall I do to be saved?" He is told "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." He replies, my mind is so blind, my affections are so depraved, there is so much hardness and corruption in my heart, that I cannot believe, I cannot repent. I am as helpless as I am guilty; all my resolutions and efforts are ineffectual, and, unless I receive mercy from God, I am forever lost. What shall we say to him in reply? Shall we direct him to ask, by importunate prayer, for the influences of the Holy Spirit to enable him to repent and believe? Shall we exhort him to break off from every sinful practice; to read, meditate upon, and pray over the word of God; to attend on the preaching of the Gospel, and seek the company and conversation of the pious, that thus he may obtain the blessing of God? No, say some, this would be to give dangerous, soul-destroying advice, and to be accessory to the sinner's perdition. Immediate submission to God must be enjoined on him, and he must be warned, that if he does not immediately repent and believe, his damnation may be sudden and awful.

There are two classes of theologians who maintain this last sentiment. One class holds it in connexion with the belief of the moral inability of the sinner to change his heart, and that repentance and faith are the gift of God:—

the other maintain, that it is as easy to repent and believe as it is to perform any bodily action; that there is no other divine influence necessary or bestowed in our religious concerns than is exerted in the preservation of our lives, and the performance of our common daily actions; and that man is *universally, necessarily, and absolutely active in regeneration.*

We are constrained to observe in relation to this last sentiment, namely, that man is active in regeneration, that we consider it a fearful departure from fundamental Gospel truth. The most eminent and successful divines of former days considered it a matter of the first importance, that a sinner should be convinced of his entire inability to perform good works acceptable to God, or to recover himself from a state of sin and misery; that being thus convinced, he might be brought, as a depraved, guilty, and helpless creature, to renounce all dependence on his own strength, and cast himself entirely on the mercy of God through Christ. Even within our own recollection, a remarkable difference has taken place in the theology and mode of preaching, of a large class of divines in our Church. The distinction between a natural and a moral inability was formerly much insisted on, and it was considered of great importance to represent the inability of the sinner as of a moral kind. This was then represented as a new and important improvement in theology, though the distinction had been made long before, in the writings of some of the soundest Calvinistic divines, and when properly explained, is wholly unobjectionable. Now, however, the *ability* of the sinner to repent and believe, and his *activity* in regeneration, are earnestly inculcated as most important improvements in theology, and intimately connected with the prevalence of revivals of

religion. The sinner is called on to repent and believe instantaneously, and is assured, that it is as easy for him to do so as to raise an arm, or to perform any bodily motion; and they who exhort him to use the means of grace are frowned on, as though they would delude, or mislead him.

In relation to this sentiment, several remarks present themselves to our minds.

1. If sinners have power to believe and repent instantaneously, then, they must, necessarily, have ability to use the means of grace aright. Surely it will not be asserted, that a sinner has power to regenerate himself,—to believe, and repent—and yet, that he has not power to hear, or read the Word of God, and pray aright. There can, therefore, be no possible reason for discouraging him, any more than for discouraging the truly pious from the use of these means. The objection carries along with it its own refutation, and we think, that we might rest the subject here, were it not too serious to be thus dismissed.

2. To discourage a sinner from using the means of grace, under the pretence that he has ability, in himself, to believe and repent, is alike delusive and dangerous. We retort the charge, and say, that it is at our peril, if we do not exhort men to hear, and read the Word of God with prayer. The opinion, that they are able at any time to repent and believe, is precisely the grand delusion which keeps impenitent men careless in sin. Every unrenewed man, whatever may be his speculative opinion, trusts, in fact, in himself, in confidence of his power to perform all duty. Here, all impenitent sinners are agreed with that class of divines who maintain human ability, and it is no wonder that the doctrine has many advocates, for it entirely accords with the feelings of the unrenewed heart. But it

is somewhat remarkable, that the grand blunder of which man has been guilty in every age, since the apostacy of Adam—the error to which he clings with the fondest attachment, and the last which he relinquishes in accepting of Christ,—that this error is now represented as a great improvement in theology; as evidencing the march of mind, and the possession of superior light; and that they who do not assent to it are often assailed as unfriendly to revivals, as behind the improvements of the day, and as lukewarm formalists. Gospel truth is, however, too precious to be lightly abandoned, and it is our duty at every cost to defend it. We do not hesitate, therefore, to declare, that we consider the representations which are frequently made in relation to human ability, as directly at variance with the Word of God, and the experience of every real believer in Christ. Do the Scriptures speak of the condition of men while unregenerate? They are then represented as dead in trespasses and sins; as without strength; as alienated from God; and the carnal mind is declared to be enmity against God, so that they who are in the flesh cannot please God. Is the deliverance of men from this state of spiritual bondage and death described? Then God is uniformly declared to be the author of this deliverance, and the strongest terms which language can supply are used, to express the greatness of the work, and the power which is exerted in its accomplishment. It is a resurrection from the dead—a new creation—a victory gained over enmity and opposition. Let it not be objected, that these representations are figurative. True, they are; but the figures are strong and expressive. What is a resurrection but the infusion of new life into a dead body, into an inactive and inert corpse? Yet, the apostle asserts, that such is the change which is effected in

regeneration. "You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins." What is the work of creation but bringing into being that which did not previously exist? Yet, to denote the absence of all holy principles and qualities in men, previous to regeneration, and their first production in the soul by the Holy Spirit, when he effects this work, the apostle calls it a new creation. "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature;" and again, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to good works." Nay more, to show that men neither concur in, nor favour the work of regeneration, that it is in no respect theirs, it is declared, to be the overcoming of enmity and opposition. "You that were sometimes alienated, and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled." Let it be remembered, that such are the representations of this work which the Holy Ghost has made in the volume of Inspiration, and though the argument derived from them, may be dismissed with a cavil, and a subterfuge, we are satisfied, that it cannot be fairly refuted. To represent the sinner as having full ability to repent and believe, in opposition to such plain, and strong declarations of Scripture, is equally erroneous and dangerous. It encourages him to trust in himself; it prevents a suitable conviction of his sinfulness, and weakness, and danger, and thereby interposes a serious obstacle in the way of an immediate application to Christ, and an entire dependence on him.

3. We remark, still further, that the manner in which sinners are exhorted to immediate submission to a sovereign God, has excited both surprise and alarm. No truths are more clearly, strongly, and repeatedly taught in Scripture than these two: that we are reconciled to God through Christ; and that we are renewed and prepared for heaven,

only by the operation of the Holy Spirit. Christ is the centre in which all the lines of the Gospel ~~must~~ meet; the only medium of access to the Father; the only source of forgiveness and peace to the sinner; and yet, we sometimes hear addresses to unregenerate men, exhorting them to immediate submission to a sovereign God, to be disposed of according to his will, irrespective of Christ, and losing sight of him as the only source of salvation. We believe that this mode of address arises from peculiar views of the nature of the atonement, as a mere exhibition of divine displeasure at sin, and from not considering Christ, in his mediatorial characters, as the Covenant Head, Substitute, Surety, and High Priest of his people. But, from whatever source it may arise, we cannot but think that it derogates from the honour of the Redeemer, and that it jeopardizes the salvation of the sinner, by not calling his attention with sufficient clearness to Christ, as the only source of eternal life.

The work of the Holy Spirit in regenerating men, is another fundamental part of the Gospel scheme. "We are saved by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost." He sheds celestial light into the darkened mind; he elevates, and purifies the debased affections; and revealing to the sinner his guilt, and helplessness, and misery, enables him by his grace to receive, and rest on Christ for salvation. What then are we to think of those exhortations, which lose sight of these important Gospel truths; which would persuade the sinner of his ability to repent and believe, and which do not direct him to the Holy Spirit, who alone can renew and purify his heart?

They may be boastingly proclaimed as improvements in theology, and as evidencing the march of mind, and the increase of light; but they really divest the Gospel of its most

peculiar and lovely features. Those exhortations, which, instead of directing the sinner to Christ that he may glorify the Father, by believing in the Son, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit, direct him to submit to God, to be saved or damned according to his sovereign will, by withdrawing his attention from Christ as the only Saviour, do practically, though we hope unintentionally, withhold from both the Redeemer and Holy Spirit that honour which the Scriptures ascribe to them, in the deliverance of our souls from spiritual death.

4. Our last remark under this head is, that usually a work of conviction precedes a work of true conversion. Sudden or instantaneous conversions, such as happened on the days of Pentecost, sometimes occur; but they should be considered as remarkable occurrences; and special care is necessary, to be satisfied that they are true conversions. The events of the day of Pentecost were for the special purpose of attesting the divine commission of the apostles, at the commencement of their ministry; and though the same divine influences are now exerted in the conversion of sinners, it yet appears to us to be an erroneous procedure, to hold up the immediate conversions of that day, as a model of what we are now to expect to be of frequent occurrence. I am aware that I am touching a delicate point, and that I shall, probably, be denounced by some, as an enemy to revivals of religion. The accusation I indignantly repel as a slander. A real revival of religion is the greatest blessing which God bestows on apostate man. But the danger of self-deception in religion is great; and it is an awful thing to be accessory to leading men into spiritual delusion. Hence we find the most skillful practical writers, carefully distinguishing between mere conviction of sin and real

conversion; laying down marks from the Scriptures by which we may judge whether we have, indeed, experienced a change of heart; guarding against a too hasty conclusion in our own favour, and exhorting us to make sure work for eternity. Now, frequently, we hear of sudden and almost instantaneous conversions—and these conversions are spoken of with the utmost confidence, as though it were criminal to doubt their reality, and the number of converts is sometimes, we fear, ostentatiously proclaimed to the world. Caution and reverence are never more necessary than when we speak of the work of the Spirit of God; and woe to the man who reviles or opposes that work! But there are some points on which we may speak without fear. The present age is remarkable for a fondness for innovation and novelty, and for contempt for what belongs to other times. But the old precious truths of the Gospel, which were preached by apostles, and martyrs, and reformers, are those only which the Holy Spirit will make effectual for the conversion of sinners. It is the old Gospel which Paul, and Augustine, and Luther, and Owen, and Whitefield, and Davies, and Edwards, and Witherspoon preached, that the Holy Spirit always has, and always will bless, and we dare preach no other Gospel, we dare embrace no mere modern refinements or innovations, lest, haply, the apostolic malediction should fall upon us “if any man preach any other Gospel unto you than that which you have received, let him be accursed.” Magnifying the ability of the sinner; diminishing a sense of our indebtedness to the grace of the Redeemer and the Holy Spirit; confidently pronouncing on the reality of what are represented as immediate conversions; undervaluing the attainments and graces of aged Christians, and determined denunciation of those who do

assent to these things, as though they must be cold hearted formalists, and enemies to revivals of religion—these, we are confident, are not the fruits of the Spirit of God. Indeed, there is reason to fear, that dark days in relation to real religion are before us. While we bless God for the revivals with which different parts of our land are favoured, there are yet many things to awaken serious apprehensions, that the benefits which would otherwise be derived from them, will be greatly diminished. A fondness for new measures in action, and for new metaphysical speculations in theology, as though that which is old must therefore be wrong,—the assumption of arbitrary principles in philosophy, and bringing these principles to the explanation of Scripture, instead of implicit submission to its plain declarations—opposition to creeds and confessions, and denunciations of them, as though they were hostile to freedom of inquiry, and the various attempts which are made to force innovations on the Church, with the distractions which these attempts cause—will, we greatly fear, produce in the minds of many a heartless indifference to religion, or open infidelity. The advocates of error have always laid claim to superior sanctity, zeal, and benevolence; they have always been loud in proclaiming their own superior wisdom, and piety, and success; but they have also always been distinguished for undervaluing the importance of sound doctrine, for a bitter and crafty disingenuousness, which, under the pretence of liberality, denounces, as bigotted and narrow minded, all those who contend for the importance of the truth which is according to godliness, and who oppose with firmness the inroads of error; and if ever that time comes, when mere conviction of sin shall be generally mistaken for a thorough conversion to God, and when multitudes,

under a transient excitement, shall be hurried, in an unconverted state, into the communion of the Church, and when in addition to these things, Gospel truth shall be undervalued, and error on fundamental points shall be extensively preached, then will the glory have departed from our Church, and the paralysing chills of spiritual death pierce its vitals.

The plainness of these remarks, will, no doubt, be censured by many, who are for treating with gentleness the inroads of error, and would cast the mantle of charity over the defects of those who are its advocates. To such we would reply, that the most effectual aid which they can lend to the cause of error, is to palliate, excuse, or defend the conduct of its advocates, and represent them as holy, devoted, and zealous above others, while they censure those who oppose their errors as exhibiting a rash and mistaken zeal. Truth is not thus to be sacrificed, nor is its cause to be thus defended; and we remember who has condemned the prophet and the priest of ancient Israel, for having "healed the hurt of the daughter of his people slightly, saying peace, peace, when there is no peace."

We remarked, that there is a second class of divines who, while they assert the inability of the sinner to change his own heart, yet maintain, that it is perilous to exhort him to any thing short of immediate repentance and faith. One of the most distinguished advocates of this sentiment is the late excellent Andrew Fuller, who contends not only that a sinner is unable to change his heart, but that a conviction of our being utterly lost must precede an application to the Saviour. "So long" says he, "as a sinner can find any hope, or any help in himself, he will never fall at the feet of Christ as utterly undone."

To this class of divines we reply,

1. Their objections would be valid, if we exhorted sinners to *rest* in the mere use of the means; for it is at our peril, if we exhort them to rest any where but in Christ. This however is not the question before us. The only point of inquiry is, whether there are not means, in the diligent use of which, a sinner may hope to receive those influences of the Holy Spirit, which are necessary to enable him to rest on Christ by faith. If any exhort sinners, as it has been asserted that some do, to lay at the pool of ordinance waiting, and satisfied with their waiting, till God shall bestow on them his grace, they greatly err. Such, however, was not the practice of sound Calvinistic divines of former days, neither is it the practice of their admirers in the present day. From the multitude of passages which can be selected with ease, from the writings of the old divines, we take but one, which however is a fair exhibition of their sentiments as a body. The quotation is from Aliene's Alarm, and is as follows: "Settle it," says he, addressing the unconverted sinner, "Settle it upon thy heart, that thou art under everlasting inability ever to recover thyself. Never think thy praying, reading, hearing, confessing, amending, will work the cure; these must be attended to, but thou art undone if thou retest in them. *Rom. x. 3.* Thou art a lost man, if thou hopest to escape drowning on any other plank but Jesus Christ. *Acts iv. 12.* Thou must unlearn thyself, and renounce thy own wisdom, thy own righteousness, thy own strength, and throw thyself wholly upon Christ, as a man that swims casts himself upon the water, or else thou canst not escape. While men trust in themselves, and establish their own righteousness, and have confidence in the flesh, they will not come savingly to

Christ. *Luke* xviii. 9. *Phil.* iii. 3. Thou must know thyself to be but loss and dung, thy strength but weakness, thy righteousness rags and rottenness, before there will be an effectual closure between Christ and thee. *Phil.* iii. 7, 8, 9. *2 Cor.* iii. 5. *Isa.* lxiv. 6. Can the lifeless carcase shake off its graves clothes, and loose the bands of death? Then mayest thou recover thyself, who art dead in trespasses and sins. Therefore, when thou goest to pray, or meditate, or do any of the duties to which thou art here directed, go out of thyself, and call in the help of the Spirit, as despairing to do any thing pleasing to God in thy own strength. Yet neglect not thy duty, but be at the pool, and wait in the way of the Spirit. While the eunuch was reading, then the Holy Ghost did send Philip to him. *Acts* viii. 28, 29. When the disciples were praying, when Cornelius and his friends were hearing, then the Holy Ghost fell upon them and filled them all. Strive to give up thyself to Christ; strive to pray; strive to meditate; strive an hundred and an hundred times; strive to do as well as thou canst, and while thou art endeavouring in the way of thy duty, the Spirit of the Lord will come upon thee, and help thee to do what of thyself thou art utterly unable to perform.”

2. We reply again, that the objection would be valid if sinners were exhorted to use the means from sinful motives, or in a sinful way. It is agreed that the works of unregenerate men are all sinful—but some actions are vastly more sinful than others. It is absurd, and dangerous to maintain that all the actions of the unregenerate are equally sinful; that they are equally guilty, whether they pray or whether they swear; whether they speak truth or utter falsehood; since, if this is true, there can be no reason for

choosing a virtuous, rather than a vicious life, and they would be emboldened to commit every crime. It is better that they should attend on, than that they should neglect the means; and they should be warned of the sinfulness of formality and lukewarmness in religion; that thereby a conviction of the deceitfulness and wickedness of their hearts may be fastened on their consciences.

There is, moreover, a great difference in the religious performances of unregenerate men. Some aim only to promote their reputation, or interest, or wealth, and thus make these performances subservient to their worldly interest. Of such, it is said, that "the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination." Others are sincere in their desires and efforts to be saved, and though these desires and efforts arise not from faith and love, but from the fear of deserved wrath, yet they are more acceptable to God, than the heartless performances of the former. These desires and efforts which arise from conviction of sin, and fear of perishing, are often preparatory to saving repentance and faith; and hence it has been said, that "religion begins in fear, is carried on by hope, and ends in love." How far the cry of nature, apart from grace, avails for the procuring of blessings, we pretend not to decide. God hears the young ravens when they cry; because Ahab humbled himself before the Lord, the evil which had been threatened to him and his posterity, was averted during his days; and Nineveh was spared from destruction, because its king and people fasted, and prayed, and forsook their evil ways; and how far the cries for mercy of an awakened sinner avail with God, we shall not pretend to determine. Besides, no one can tell when the renewing influences of the Holy Spirit are first communi-

cated, or what actions of an awakened sinner proceed from nature, or from grace.

3. We observe still further, that, when men seriously attempt to use the means of grace, that they become acquainted with their real character and condition; with their depravity and helplessness; and thus their self-confidence is destroyed. The chief reason that is offered against exhorting the unregenerate to use the means of grace is, lest they should rest in them; and that by urging them to immediate repentance and faith, they will be kept from trusting in any thing which they can perform. But to address a sinner, who is distressed with the perplexity and anguish of an awakened conscience, in the language only of denunciation, and tell him he must instantly believe or perish, and that you have nothing further to say to him, appears to us to be a treatment, as unskilful as it is unkind. We are told of the blessed Redeemer, that "the bruised reed he did not break, and the smoking flax he did not quench," and that "he spake a parable to this end, that men ought always to pray and not to faint." The preacher of the Gospel is commissioned to proclaim a message of mercy, and should sympathize with those who are alarmed at their guilt and danger, in all their doubts, and discouragements, and temptations, and should cheerfully afford them the instruction and encouragement which they need.

Besides, as it has been already observed, it is only when sinners are awakened to a sense of their danger of perishing, and make an effort to save themselves, that they feel their utter inability to repent, or believe, or do any thing which is spiritually good. Then first, when they attempt to put forth strength, do they learn their weakness. When first they seriously attempt, in sincerity, to use the means; to

hear the preached word that they may learn and live; to read, and meditate, and pray, it is then that they become sensible of the impenitence and depravity of their hearts, of the blindness of their minds, and of their alienation from all good. They are often filled with surprise and dismay, when they contemplate the sin that attaches to all their religious performances; the coldness and formality of their prayers; their weakness, and failure in the fulfilment of their resolutions, their many omissions of duty, and their backwardness to hold communion with God. It is after sad experience has taught them their weakness, and they are compelled to cry "help, Lord! we perish without thine aid," that grace is bestowed, and the Holy Spirit enables them to believe in Christ, that they may be saved. Thus, while they are striving to enter in at the strait gate by the use of means, God meets them in mercy, and places them in the way to life.

IV. A few remarks designed for the *practical improvement* of our subject, shall close our discourse.

1. Let those who are anxious for the salvation of their souls, be encouraged fervently and perseveringly to seek the mercy of the Lord. "The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force." Let no obstacles discourage, no difficulties fright, or weary you. "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" The present is the season of conflict, heaven is the abode of perfect bliss. "Strive to enter in at the strait gate." Prize the Sabbath, and the ordinances of the House of God, and take his Word for your counsellor and guide. "Search the Scriptures." Read them frequently, devoutly, and with deep meditation. By daily and impor-

tunate prayer, ask that your sins may be forgiven, and your hearts be renewed. Repair to the merciful Redeemer, and commit your souls to him; live in dependence on his grace, and he will keep you from falling, and present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy.

2. While we exhort impenitent sinners to use the means, we also solemnly remind them, that repentance and faith are their immediate duty; that impenitence and unbelief are hateful to God, and will ruin their souls. Unbelief in Christ is, emphatically, the great soul destroying sin. It will be of no avail to plead in excuse your inability to repent and believe, for that inability arises from, and is a proof of the corruption of your natures. The carnal mind is enmity against God; and are you content to live at enmity with God, and under his displeasure. Will you say, "Lord, such is my aversion to thee, that I cannot mourn over my offences against thee—such is my delight in sin, that I prefer it, even before thy approbation?" "As ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." Is the enmity of your hearts against the divine government and laws so strong that you cannot subdue it; do you find that no efforts, no promises, no resolutions, no vows can avail to deliver you from the debasing influence, that sin sheds over your souls?—go, then, to the mercy seat, and confess before God your depravity and weakness, and ask that he would give his Spirit to renew your souls. Suffer me, however, to remind you that you are now in an awful state of sin and spiritual death; that you are neglecting your most important concerns, and becoming more hardened in irreligion under the very means which are designed to promote your salvation. Remember the many privileges which

you have abused; the many sabbaths which you have profaned; the many prayerless days which you have spent; the many admonitions which you have slighted; how much your Bible has been neglected, and how often the voice of conscience has been stifled, instruction despised, and reproof hated. Think you that it will be a light thing to stand convicted of all these sins, before the throne of your awful and incensed Judge. You may now jest with these things, and in scenes of riot and mirth with your sinful companions, you may scoff at the sacred institutions of religion, but you will stand confounded in the presence of Almighty God. When the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the earth be burnt up, and the elements melt with fervent heat, and assembled worlds stand before Christ to be judged by him, jesting and scoffs will cease. Can your heart endure, or your hands be strong before the consuming fire of the Almighty's wrath? Be entreated then to become wise in time. As yet you have lived in vain. Immersed in worldly pursuits, you have forgotten the heavenly inheritance, and have been posting with rapid strides to ruin. But there is yet hope concerning you. To you the voice of mercy calls, inviting you to return to your God that you may live. "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him, and to our God for he will abundantly pardon."

3. Finally. In the use of the means of grace we should endeavour to hold communion with God, and to make advances in knowledge and holiness. Through these means we hold intercourse with God, we express our reverence

and love, and implore his grace; and through them he bestows on us heavenly blessings. Let us guard against resting in the mere lifeless formal use of them, or imagining that by such a use we have fulfilled our duty. In all our attempts to worship, we should remember the declaration of the Redeemer, "God is a Spirit, and they who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." Whenever we have attended on the means, we should press on our consciences the inquiry, "what spiritual benefits have I received? what good resolutions have I formed? what advances have I made in wisdom and purity?" Thus shall we become more meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light; and when death shall remove us from this region of shadows, of conflict, and of sin, we shall be admitted into the immediate presence of God, and unite with the whole company of the redeemed in the exalted worship of heaven.





